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ABSTRACT

In 1994 the Center for Civic Education published "National Standards for Civics and Government," content standards clearly defining what students should know and be able to do as the outcome of civic education in school. This standards project has been an attempt to standardize the best in civic education and to make the Standards accessible to all teachers and learners of U.S. civics and government. This report takes a closer look at the National Standards by responding to three questions: (1) "What conception of civic education is conveyed by these National Standards?"; (2) "What notable trends in educational practices exemplify the implementation or operationalization of ideas in the standards?"; and (3) "How have the National Standards influenced national assessment of student achievement?" This report concludes that since 1994 the Standards have become criteria by which to criticize constructively civic education programs and practices. However, the National Standards in Civics project should not be a "one-shot" project. Rather, constructive criticism directed at the Standards should be the stimulator of the next round of development of U.S. national standards for civic education. (CB)

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NATIONAL STANDARDS AS REFLECTORS AND DIRECTORS OF PRACTICES IN CIVIC EDUCATION IN THE U.S.A.

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National Standards as Reflectors and Directors of Practices in Civic Education in the U.S.A.

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In the autumn of 1994, the Center for Civic Education published and distributed *National Standards for Civics and Government*.[1] During a two-year project, more than 3,000 scholars, teachers, parents, government officials, and representatives of business and industry contributed to the development of these standards.

The primary purpose of this project was to clearly describe what students should know and be able to do as the outcome of civic education in school. The primary assumption of this project was that clearly stated content standards would be useful guides to curriculum development, classroom instruction, and assessment or testing of student achievement.

The standards would be targets for educational effort by curriculum developers, teachers, and learners. The civics curriculum would be designed to fit the standards; teachers using this curriculum would teach in terms of the standards; students would work to achieve the standards; and evaluators would create tests to determine whether or not students could do what the standards demand of them. Thus, a coherent system of civic education, based on the standards, would operate to greatly improve teaching and learning of civics and government, an important school subject.

The standards for civic education both reflect and direct practices of curriculum developers, teachers, and evaluators. They reflect the best ideas and activities of civic education, from which they were derived. And they are designed to direct the improvement of civic education by systematically influencing all teachers and students throughout the country to use the very best ideas and practices, which typically are employed only in the schools of the most advantaged students. So, the standards project has been an attempt to standardize the best in civic education and to make the best pervasively available to all teachers and learners of civics and government in the United States of America.

What conception of civic education is conveyed by these national standards? What notable trends in educational practices exemplify the implementation or operationalization of ideas in the standards? How have the national standards influenced national assessment of student achievement? The remainder of this report is my response to these three questions.

A Conception of Civic Education

The national standards project presents a conception of civic education that fits the civic culture of the United States of America. It calls for systematic teaching and learning of the principles and values underlying citizenship and government in our country. According to the *National Standards for Civics and Government*.

> The goal of education in civics and government is informed, responsible participation in political life by competent citizens committed to the fundamental values and principles of American constitutional democracy. Their effective and responsible participation requires the acquisition of a body of knowledge and of intellectual and participatory skills. Effective

and responsible participation also is furthered by development of certain dispositions or traits of character that enhance the individual's capacity to participate in the political process and contribute to the healthy functioning of the political system and improvement of society.[2]

As indicated by this quotation, there are three components of a sound conception of civic education: (1) civic knowledge, (2) civic skills, and (3) civic dispositions or virtues. These components are to be used interactively as the essential elements of civic education.

The civic knowledge component, the core of the standards, is embodied in five fundamental and enduring questions: "(1) What are civic life, politics, and government? (2) What are the foundations of the American political system? (3) How does the government established by the Constitution embody the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy? (4) What is the relationship of the United States to other nations and to world affairs? (5) What are the roles of citizens in American democracy?"[3]

These five questions denote concepts or principles about the theory and practice of government and citizenship in the United States, which students must know if they would become informed and responsible citizens. Examples of these concepts or principles are constitutionalism, representative democracy, popular sovereignty, individual rights, due process of law, federalism, checks and balances among three branches of government, judicial review, civil society, market-based economy, and so forth. These core ideas, of course, are only a few representative examples of the conceptual foundation of civic education.

Civic skills is the second main component of civic education, according to the *National Standards for Civics and Government*. There are intellectual skills that involve identification,

explanation, and evaluation of information and ideas. There are participatory skills that involve monitoring and influencing public policies and decisions by working cooperatively with other persons and groups. Together, these intellectual and participatory skills involve the use of knowledge to think and act competently in response to challenges of civic life in a constitutional democracy.

Civic skills, both intellectual and participatory, are inseparable from a body of knowledge or content. If students would think critically and act effectively in response to a public issue, they must understand the terms of the issue, its origins, the alternative responses to it, and the likely consequences of these responses. Further, some knowledge or content is more important than other content as substance for the students' thought and action. Thus, the *National Standards for Civics and Government* give direction to curriculum developers and teachers about content selection priorities, so that precious instructional time will be used wisely to teach knowledge that is of most worth in the education of citizens.

The third and last major component of civic education is civic dispositions, or as I prefer to call them, civic virtues. This component refers to the traits of character necessary to the preservation and improvement of civic life in a constitutional democracy. These civic virtues pertain to the rights and responsibilities of individuals that promote the common good. Examples of these civic virtues are respect for the worth and dignity of each person, civility, integrity, self-discipline, tolerance, compassion, and patriotism.

Implementation of National Standards: Trends in Practices of Civic Education

The three main components of civic education, presented in *National Standards for Civics and Government*, can be used by curriculum developers and teachers to create a framework for

civic education from which to derive the lessons of a systematic course of study. Thus, the *National Standards for Civics and Government* are being used by textbook publishers, curriculum guide writers, and classroom teachers to guide their work.

Several notable trends have emerged that reveal the impact of ideas in the national standards project on civic education in schools. I will briefly comment on eight of these trends.[4]

Trend 1: Systematic teaching of core concepts or principles. Good civic education depends upon knowledge of centrally important ideas. In recognition of this wisdom, civic educators are becoming more and more interested in systematic teaching of core concepts or principles. They are emphasizing the criteria by which one identifies instances or non-instances of core concepts, such as constitutionalism, representative democracy, and individual rights. And, they are teaching students to use the criteria to analyze and evaluate information about political institutions and behavior.

Trend 2: Analysis of case studies. There is a growing tendency to require students to apply core concepts to the analysis of case studies. Thus, students may demonstrate that they understand a concept by using it correctly to organize and interpret information. Case studies may be about the political behavior of individuals and groups. Or the case studies may be about legal disputes decided by judges or juries in a court of law. In any case, this teaching strategy brings the drama and vitality of authentic civic life into the classroom and demands the practical application of academic ideas to make sense of the data of civic reality.

Trend 3: Comparative and international analysis of government and citizenship. The global resurgence of constitutional democracy has prompted the interest of civic educators in the comparative method of teaching and learning about government and citizenship. So they are

requiring students to compare institutions of constitutional democracy in the United States of America with their counterparts in other democracies in our contemporary world. The expectation is that this kind of comparative analysis will deepen students' understanding of their own democratic institutions while expanding their knowledge of democratic principles. Further, this kind of comparative analysis is likely to diminish ethnocentrism, as students learn the various ways that principles of democracy can be practiced.

Trend 4: Development of decision-making skills. Case studies of political and legal issues are used by teachers to develop decision-making skills of students. Students are taught to identify occasions of decisions, to examine the alternative choices and the likely consequences of each choice, and to defend one choice as better than the others. This is an especially effective way to teach application of intellectual skills to the realities of civic life.

Trend 5: Development of participation skills and civic virtues through cooperative learning activities. Teachers are emphasizing cooperative learning in small groups, which requires students to work together to achieve a common objective. Through this cooperative learning activity, students develop various participatory skills and the civic virtues associated with them.

Trend 6: Development of participatory skills and civic virtues through service learning activities. An increasingly popular method of civic education is service learning activities. Service learning connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning, personal growth, and civic responsibility.[5] There is a strong connection between service learning activities and development of civic skills and virtues of the kind specified in the *National Standards for Civics and Government*.

Trend 7: The use of literature to teach civic virtues. Civics teachers have recognized that the study of literature, both fictional and historical, exposes students to interesting people, who exemplify civic virtues in dramatic situations. The characters in these stories, therefore, may become role models for students. At the very least, they are positive examples of particular civic virtues that can help students understand the meaning and importance of morality in civic life.[6]

Trend 8: Active learning of civic knowledge, skills, and virtues. Civic educators are tending to involve students actively in their learning of knowledge, skills, and virtues. There is both intellectual and physical activity in this approach to learning. Examples of active learning include systematic concept learning, analysis of case studies, development of decision-making skills, cooperative learning tasks, service learning tasks, and the interactive group discussions that are associated with teaching civic virtues through literary study. Intellectually active learning of knowledge, in contrast to passive reception of it, appears to be associated with higher levels of achievement. Furthermore, it enables students to develop skills and processes needed for independent inquiry and civic decision making throughout a lifetime. These are capacities of citizenship needed to make a constitutional democracy work.

Application of National Standards to National Assessment

Do widely used methods of civic education produce desired results? The *National Standards for Civics and Government* are being used to assess learning outcomes that may be associated with civic education in schools. In particular, these national standards are being used by the United States Department of Education to develop a national assessment of civic learning that will be conducted in 1998. This national assessment project, initiated in 1995, is one of a series of projects conducted under the label National Assessment of Educational Progress

(NAEP). For example, the United States Department of Education periodically conducts NAEP projects in core subjects of the school curriculum, such as mathematics, science, reading and writing skills, history, and geography. The new NAEP project in civics, begun in 1995, is the first to be tied directly to a set of national standards developed in advance of the NAEP project.

The first step in the new NAEP civics project was development of a framework in terms of which the national assessment would be conducted. This framework development activity produced a document: *1998 NAEP Civics Assessment Planning Project: Recommended Assessment Framework and Test Specifications*.[7] This document is being used to guide development of test items for the national assessment to be conducted in 1998. This framework document also will be used to guide interpretation of test results. A final report on this NAEP civics assessment will be available in the year 2000, at the end of this project.

The NAEP civics assessment framework, the keystone of the project, includes all the main components of civic education specified in the *National Standards for Civics and Government*. This product, therefore, will yield a national assessment of student achievement that will indicate the extent to which our students achieve various standards pertaining to civic education.[8] Nationally representative samples of students will be assessed near the end of their experiences in grades 4, 8, and 12.

Results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in civics will be used to highlight strengths and weaknesses of civic education in the United States of America; that is, civic education as it is conceptualized and operationalized through the test items of NAEP. Thus, these results may be used by curriculum developers and teachers to address needs and deficiencies revealed by the national assessment project.

Conclusion

The *National Standards for Civics and Government* have stimulated productive activity to improve civic education. These standards, have become criteria by which to constructively criticize civic education programs and practices. The standards themselves, however, must also be objects of constructive criticism if civic education would be continuously improved.

So the national standards in civics project should not be a "one-shot" project. Rather, constructive criticism directed at the standards should be the stimulator of the next round of development of national standards for civic education in the United States.[9] In this way, the momentum for educational improvement launched by this standards project will continue. And civic education will continue to be a foundation for responsible citizenship in the United States of America.

Notes

1. The *National Standards for Civics and Government* is available from the Center for Civic Education, 5146 Douglas Fir Road, Calabasas, CA 91302-1467. Call toll free, 800/350-4223 or Fax: 818/591-9330. You may order 1-9 copies for $12.00 per copy. Ten or more copies are $11.00 per copy. Add 10% for shipping and handling costs.

2. See page 1 of the *National Standards for Civics and Government*.

3. See pages 87-88 of the *National Standards for Civics and Government*.

4. A useful annotated bibliography on current trends in civic education is provided by a new publication, *Resources on Civic Education for Democracy: International Perspectives*. To order a copy of this book, call or write the Social Studies Development Center at Indiana University at 2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120, Bloomington, Indiana 47408-2698; 800/266-

3815; Fax: 812/855-0455; Internet: ericso@indiana.edu. The price is $5.00, which includes shipping and handling costs.

5. Information about service learning can be obtained by writing to Dr. Robert Shumer, Director, National Service-Learning Cooperative Clearinghouse, University of Minnesota, 1954 Buford Avenue, Room 290, St. Paul, Minnesota 55108; 800/808-7378; 612/625-6276; Internet: serve@maroon.tc.umn.edu.

6. An excellent guide to the use of literature in teaching civic virtues is edited by Sandra Stotsky, *Connecting Civic Education and Language Education*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1991. Another useful source is *Books That Build Character* by William Kilpatrick and others. The publisher in 1994 was Simon and Schuster of New York.

7. A copy of the framework of the 1998 NAEP civics project can be obtained by contacting the Educational Information Branch, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, United States Department of Education, 555 New Jersey Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20208-5641; call 800/424-1616 or 202/219-1651.

8. Due to contextual and legal limitations, the NAEP civics project is not able to directly and comprehensively assess participatory skills and civic virtues. The emphasis is on civic knowledge and intellectual skills.

9. A set of critical reviews of the *National Standards for Civics and Government* was published in *PS: Political Science and Politics*, volume 19 (March 1996): 47-62.